

Duxbury's Town Landings

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY
(Second of a 2-part series)

"Unless you gentlemen bestir yourselves"

Labor Day has come and gone and all that remains are the happy memories of holiday guests and a feeling of utter and total exhaustion. I tried to picture in my first article on the town's landings a community of people, happy in their recreational life, with ample areas for boat launching and sailing and motor-boating and fishing and beaches for uncrowded public bathing. It was all carefully orchestrated for the town's residents and for this we owe a great debt to our town's leaders in the recent past and our heads of town departments now -- especially our police and fire officials and our director of lands and natural resources, who stand guard for us and monitor our bay and beach recreational areas.

The direct route from Highway No. 14 to Duxbury Beach through the edge of Marshfield and Green Harbor successfully cares for out-of-town residents who can have easy access to a wide expanse of beach for a modest fee, or, if desired, can walk across Powder Point Bridge for a free swim and picnic. To describe this scene to a possible Rip Van Winkle who has been asleep for the past 50 years would face colossal incredulity. It was not at all this way in his (and my) time.

With the growing general use of the automobile in the early and mid-twenties, Duxbury and other South Shore towns and the Cape were overrun by out-of-town visitors, the word "victimized" comes to mind, although it is probably too strong. But the facts are that these dear fresh-air and cool water-starved folks who had been cooped up all week (remember the work week was 6 days long then) in the hot, smelly, stuffy factories of Brockton, Rockland, Abington and Whitman would burst forth like an uncorked bottle of home brew on Sundays and make their way to the seashore wherever the tide would welcome them. Local people felt powerless as these swarms of hot and tired families came to our shores on a stifling Sunday afternoon. So upsetting was this that neighborhoods brought protests even to the level of Town Meeting as the Standish Shore inhabitants did. The worst of these spots was Long Bridge, as it was called, whose far end was nothing short of a mob scene, with cars foundering in the soft sand turning around and an occasional one making a mad dash to make the hard pan at the outer beach. Two out of 3 would make it amid swirling clouds of soft sand and hot dust, and stalwart bathers would respond to cries

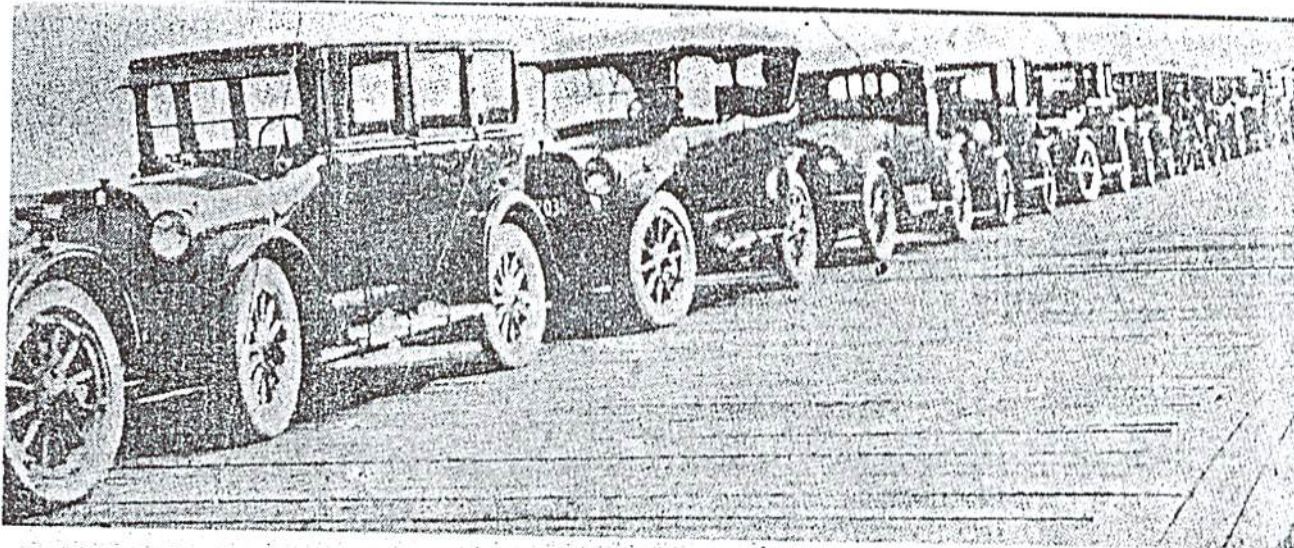
for rescue for the one that got mired.

The bridge would be lined its full length with parked cars, an occasional one with towels hung in the rolled up windows so it could function as a temporary bathhouse. I checked my recollections with Ralph Blakeman, who verified all I have written here and added the observation that at least from his vantage point, i.e., the Duxbury Beach Stand he has operated for many years, people don't feel it necessary to hang towels at car windows today. They simply walk out to the beach or behind an umbrella and dress for a swim. Ralph added further information that I had not recalled, namely, that these out-of-towners frequently parked their cars on Powder Point lawns and in driveways, until the road around through the northern section of Duxbury Beach by the Hummock was constructed in the mid-thirties.

These pictures I present here to emphasize that whatever we do with our town landings we will not tolerate a return to this. The problem of assuring protection to shore property owners and to the public for access to the water has long been a thorny one. While the earliest settlers were guaranteed water rights as a matter of necessity for water transportation and fishing, the problem of assuring them while at the same time protecting the rights of the property owners became acute in the mid-17th century. It was this problem that the "Colonial Ordinances" of 1641-1647 addressed, and Attorney Donald Connors tells me that recent court decisions on coastal rights have more and more turned to these for current guidelines. Massachusetts (and Maine -- for it was then under the jurisdiction of Massachusetts) are the only coastal states that give shore property owners rights to the mean low water mark. At the same time people who have to get to the water for livelihood i.e., for fishing or shellfishing or "fowling," are allowed full use of this same area. It appears to be an effort to balance off the property owner's rights and those who depend on the tidal area for livelihood.

For many years Duxbury's public landings presented no problems, and in 1822 and 1834 some boundaries were erected. In 1893 a committee was appointed (one of several to study the problem over the years) to look into the matter and report back with many recommendations in 1899. Their final paragraph follows:

"Every year the attractions of this old historic town with its beautiful bay are drawing more and more people to its shores, and that in the march of events the shore properties will come into use for those seeking rest and recreation and who are in quest of summer homes. When this happens unless you gentlemen bestir yourselves to acquire outlets to the bay the shore will be closed to the public from Josselyn Ave. to the Kingston line with the exception of the town landing south of Captain's Hill. (now,



Cars once parked on the bridge.

Howland's Landing acquired in 1893) which is out of the route of travel."

The authors of these sentiments could not have foreseen how drastically the coming into general use of the automobile in large numbers would alter the situation, both making it easier to get to designated areas equipped with space for the parking of cars and boat trailers and more difficult (and practically impossible to use because of police surveillance and fire lane requirements) to use, for they were established when it was assumed that people would walk to the shore at high tide for a swim. It is important to recognize that it is in an honest effort to minimize rowdiness and vandalism so evident at such places as Howland's, and now, since it was acquired by the town by purchase in 1972, the Bay Farm landing. As a meat and milk peddler I can recall the admonition I was given that at high tide on a summer's day I could do no business on Josselyn Ave. or on Winsor and Water streets and the Indian-named streets on Standish Shore. Neighbors and friends who lived back of the water were welcome to bathe here if they wished; the ban was usually exercised only against abusers of the privilege who would come at all times, day or night and leave the familiar litter of broken beer bottles and cardboard picnic boxes.

Duxbury pioneered in petitioning the legislature in 1907 to set aside all along the coast certain landings for public water access. This was the result of the work of a committee set up in 1904. Another town committee was activated in 1922 commissioned by Town Meeting to do a major overhaul of our town landings. In 1935 as most of us old-timers recall, a major appropriation with federal help was made to dredge the channel into Mattakesett Court, and this

was also repeated in the 1950s and early '60s. The last and definitive report on our town landings was made in 1974-75, and it is this to which I owe so much of this information. I also owe a great debt to Myrna Walsh, who spent countless hours in research at the Duxbury Room and in the assessors' office and in the town archives to bring us this information.

The report first of all makes a distinction between "Town Landings" and "Public walkways." Town Landings would be larger water access areas with some parking of cars. Such would be the Old Cove, the "Big Beach" -- at both ends -- Blue Fish River bridge behind the old No. One Engine House, Mattakesett Court, Harden Hill (off 51 Washington St.) Howland's, and Landing Rd. (off Bay Rd.). They also include Hicks' Point, just this side of the Bay Farm area, for it has limited parking space and a hard pan for launching boats, but since it is only usable for perhaps an hour before and after high tide I could not consider it as a major landing.

Other avenues of water access listed in the report are as follows (beginning at the Marshfield line):

The end of Duck Hill Rd. -- which is listed in records as far back as 1834 and now cannot be practical except as access to the salt marsh, where my father used to cut hay.

Along Back River and off Powder Point Ave.

Simeon Soyle's and Clarke Peterson's (this latter better known as "Dr. Bumpus" landing and used at present by shellfish diggers).

There is no public landing or walkway all the way from Powder Point bridge to the Blue Fish River bridge although as I was growing up I recall an informal beach east of Bumpus Park opposite what was then Powder Point School used as a hotel during the summer months.

The juncture of St. George St. and Blue Fish River -- an excellent location for nature and bird observation and a superb view of the bridge and bay.

The 3 landings at Water St., Winsor, and Josselyn Ave.

Shipyard Lane should be listed here although it is technically not a landing at all, but was given by Eben Ellison for a public bathing beach. In conversation with Don Beers, our harbor master, I discovered that the current worry shared by Brad Martin of our Department of Lands and Natural Resources is the present dangerous mix of power boats and bathers at all our landings, and especially here and at Howland's.

The Indian-named streets on Standish Shore were laid out by the town and paved at town expense in 1907 but a superior court on June 27, 1974 ruling states that "public rights on the seashore do not include the right to use otherwise private beaches for bathing purposes," and so are lost as beaches for all practical purposes to the general public, as are most

of these walk ways which the 1975 committee report recommends opening up again. The walkway through the Myles Standish homesite is open and used regularly by sightseers but swimming is prohibited here.

Mrs. Merry and I have found it a pleasant place to visit with its lovely view of the bay and Plymouth and we have usually walked down the path to the shoreline past the stone marker for the spot where the Standish's family had their well till the great storm of 1851 wiped it out.

And this brings us to consider the future of our town landings. The 1975 report recommended the reopening of all of them with the posting of signs and the marking of stone boundaries and for the walkways "No Parking" signs. It should be noted that 2 town meetings, e.g., in 1971 and 1974, appropriated money to do this, but conversations with town officials reveals that police surveillance and fire protection, not to mention vandalism and rowdiness required that the disused landings should remain that way for the present. I believe that with our new bikeways program some of them could be brought back into current use, and should be. A random sampling of young people's preference, however, shows they would rather ride to the Big Beach, where they can find so many of their peers and always swimmable water, rather than slogging through mud for a hundred yards each way as at Standish Shores and Water and Winsor streets.

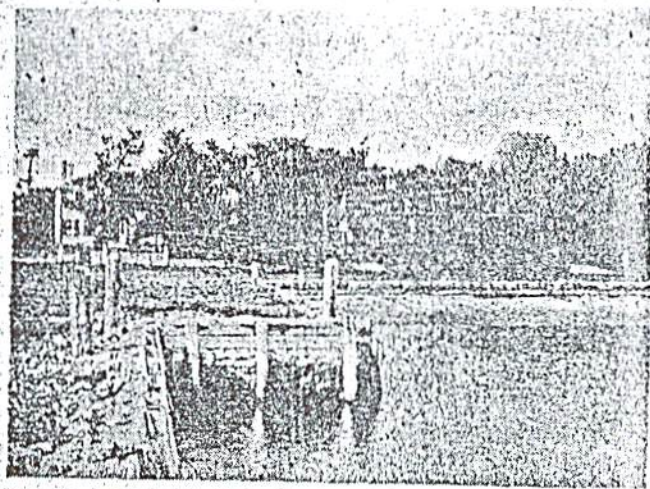
Two realistic opportunities for expanding water recreational use are at hand. A movement to build a marina at Howland's Landing with the option of purchasing the Blairhaven property began a few years ago and is still alive though dormant. The Bay Farm landing has boundless possibilities for all types of water use, with ample parking space and distance

from residential areas, and undoubtedly will become a popular haven for seashore lovers in the days ahead. Perhaps this would furnish a direction for some wealthy civic-minded citizen of which we have many in Duxbury.

The report cites 2 more areas that could be expanded -- one the Old Cove, and another what the report refers to as "Ford's Stand." Checking out "Ford's Stand," I discovered that this is no longer Ford's nor a stand, and has become "Bradford's Parking lot," located on the Hummock side of Duxbury Beach. It is now a bona fide parking lot with chargeable fees, and uses an entrance to the ocean water that town records consider a public landing. I think the present arrangements with this lot and landing are satisfactory and with the Blakeman stand nearby and the entire stretch of beach beyond I can't see the value of any change here.

In conclusion it needs only to be pointed out that these 2 articles are an introduction to the subject rather than a definitive description of our public landings. Further probing would unearth some remarkably interesting stories of the landings and of their coming and going into problem areas over the years. For example Myrna Walsh discovered in the assessors' index of land plots 3 landings on Powder Point that have been completely and totally lost. Perhaps the Registry of Deeds in Plymouth County Court House would clarify the situation. But this is for the moment beyond the scope of this essay.

For in all that I am doing in reporting on "Duxbury's treasures" from the past, I am attempting to rekindle enthusiasm in this community, by making us all aware of the gifts that have been handed to us in the past, and not least of all that of public landings.



People were bathed on the beach in front of the King Caesar House.